

First of all, I would like to say that it is my honor to be here and share with you my thoughts about (inaudible) for the European Union's policy towards Belarus as the main problem for democratization of this society.

Independent journalists in Belarus have faced increasing difficulties in recent years. The state-owned electronic and print media are under tight administrative control. The directors of TV and radio stations and (inaudible) and of state-run newspapers are appointed by the president. They transmit programs which we can call only as a massive propaganda for President Lukashenko and permanent criticism of E.U. countries and the USA.

The programs are watched and listened to by the Polish population living in eastern Poland, especially by Belarusian citizens of Poland. Such a situation can raise the specter of national and regional countries in this region as well as divide Polish citizens of Belarusian descent, especially that in 2006 more than \$60 million will be allocated from the Belarusian state budget for the allotment of state-run mass media. It is \$20 million smaller than in the last year, and it's twice as much as the sum allocated for the mass media in 2004.

In recent months, the pressure on the free media has increased alarmingly in Belarus. At the September, the state's printing house canceled its contracts to publish the independent Narodnya Volya, forcing it to move to a printer in neighboring Russia.

Two weeks later, on 18 October, Vasil Hrodnikau, a freelance correspondent, was found dead in his house in Minsk. He died of a traumatic brain injury. His brother told the media that Vasil Hrodnikau has been constantly harassed by the authorities over the past year and that he believed his brother was killed for the criticism of President Lukashenko.

Last October, freelance journalist, Veronika Charkasova, was stabbed to death in her apartment. She had been investigating alleged arms sales between Belarus and Iraq.

In November, Belposhta, the state-owned newspaper distribution company, which has a monopoly on distribution, decided to stop publishing privately owned papers as of January 2006. This will prevent coverage of the elections for March.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists has called on journalists and media groups around the world to come to their aid. The BAJ was awarded by the European parliament's Sakharov prize in 2004 for defense of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

What is the role of the European parliament and the European Commission in the field of free media in Belarus? In August 2005, the European Commission granted 138,000 contracts to Deutsche Welle Radio to broadcast via radio and Internet into Belarus. These programs are in the initial stage primarily in the Russian language. Broadcasting takes place over 12 months, as of 1 November, 2005. Fifteen minutes daily broadcast, Monday through Friday, especially dedicated to Belarus information about political, social and economic matters.

Following this initiative, the European Commission has announced on the 26th of January its decision on the selection of a consortium led by media consultants from Germany with partners

from Poland, Lithuania, Belarus and Russia. The two-year project for 2 million euro will cover radio and TV broadcasts, internet support to the Belarusian written press and training for journalists. The radio and TV broadcasting programs will start in February before the presidential election in Belarus and start two hours daily broadcast.

In the next month, Poland's foreign ministry plans to open a radio station broadcasting to Belarus. The programs will be broadcasted in Belarusian and Polish by the independent radio station, financed with NGO's and government's funds and mainly addressed to (inaudible) regionally using (inaudible) bandwidth and in the whole Belarus territory in the medium bandwidth.

This will also be aimed at the Belarus minority in Poland. All members of the Polish parliament in the Committee of Foreign Affairs and the Media Committee agree to support politically and financially such a radio station based on Radio Station Racyja, which was in the past supported by non-governmental organizations from the United States.

My conclusions and recommendations. In my opinion, systematic exchange of information and views between the European parliament and the United States Senate is very much desired and needed. It concerns both projects which are currently running, future projects as well as long-standing priorities and possible future cooperation between the U.S. and the E.U. in relations with Belarus.

Currently, Deutsche Welle broadcasts programs in Russian and forthcoming programs by the Media Consulta consortium are going to be in a mixed Russian and Belarusian version. On the one hand, such programs in Russian will give greater accessibility to listeners within Belarus, but on the other hand it will decrease their visibility among other radio and TV stations, which are at present exclusively available in Russian.

The lack of clear criteria to the exclusiveness of the Belarusian language in media projects as organized by the European Commission weakens our ability to support and strengthen the Belarusian national identity as distinct from Russian, which is crucial to the political independence vis-a-vis Russia. The resources for support of media projects directed to Belarus are not sufficient, and given the reluctance of many European governments to fully engage in terms of financial assistance and problems of peace (inaudible).

It would be of additional asset if the United States participated in the financing of such projects, delivering also technical and know-how assistance. We should therefore exchange information about actual demands for support of media projects.

And the issue of freedom of expression and the problem of independence in media in Belarus should become one of the priorities and go in higher place on the agenda at the E.U., the United States and high political level and the level of working groups cooperation.

In my opinion, this should also be present in contact between U.S.-Russia and E.U.-Russia relationships. Thank you very much.